

Meeting Summary
Panther Recovery Team, Reintroduction Subteam Meeting
Atlanta, Georgia
November 13-14, 2002

Reintroduction subteam members present:

Jared Bailey for Brian Murphy, Quality Deer Management Association
Chris Belden for Brad Gruver, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
John Kasbohm, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Dwight LeBlanc, USDA Wildlife Services
Laurie Macdonald, Defenders of Wildlife
Jim Ozier, Georgia Wildlife Resources Division
Andrew Schock, National Wildlife Federation
David Thompson, White Oak Conservation Center
Stephen Williams, Florida Panther Society

Other participants and observers:

Karen Hill, Florida Panther Society
Cindy Thatcher, University of Tennessee
Frank van Manen, U.S. Geological Survey
Wesley Woolf, National Wildlife Federation

Reintroduction subteam members not present:

Buddy Baker, South Carolina Department of Natural Resources
Jimmy Bullock, International Paper Company
Joe Clark, U.S. Geological Survey
David Dorman, U.S. Forest Service
Gary Lester, Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries
Richard Rummel, Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks
Mark Sasser, Alabama Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries

Others invited but not attending:

American Farm Bureau Federation

Arkansas Game and Fish Commission
Florida Farm Bureau Federation

The goals of this meeting were:

1. To review the ranked threats developed at the last meeting.
2. To develop a recovery strategy and step down outline of actions that once implemented would remove the threats to the species as they relate to reintroduction and the historic range outside of South Florida.

Second Recovery Team Meeting Summary:

A summary of the second recovery team meeting held Dec 18-19, 2001 was distributed to the subteam. No comments or changes were expressed.

Project Updates:

John Kasbohm gave the following updates:

Focus groups:

An action item identified at the second recovery team meeting was for the Service to develop subcommittees to plan focus group/stakeholder meetings that would be used to solicit public input into the recovery plan revision. As a result, two planning meetings were held. The first meeting was held on August 27, in Naples, Florida; in attendance were John Kasbohm, Dawn Jennings, Bert Beyers (FWS, Vero Beach), Layne Hamilton (FWS FPNWR), Tom Jones, and Jora Young. The second was held October 3 in Covington, Georgia among John Kasbohm, Jim Ozier, Andrew Schock (Jimmy Bullock was to attend but could not at the last minute because of a hurricane).

At the south Florida meeting, the group concluded that a productive set of stakeholder meetings directed at the recovery plan revision would not be possible until the Service released the MERIT Conservation Strategy to the public. Until that time, questions from affected stakeholders likely would center on the Strategy, its associated maps and regulatory implications. These discussions would be premature for Service staff to conduct, and without being able to provide meaningful answers, would prevent discussions of the recovery plan. Stakeholder meetings in south Florida will be postponed until the completion of the MERIT strategy. When these meeting are developed, they should be used to integrate the recovery plan revision and the conservation strategy.

At the second meeting, the reintroduction subteam subcommittee concluded that a series of four stakeholder meetings should be held in 2003. The purpose of the meetings would be to provide an opportunity for key affected stakeholder groups to share and identify their concerns, issues, conflicts, and potential solutions with regard to panther recovery and restoration in unoccupied areas of the Southeast. For each meeting, 8-10 representatives from a single and specific stakeholder group that could represent that group on a regional basis would be invited to participate in a professionally facilitated discussion of the issues. The stakeholders to target are 1) Federal and State wildlife agencies and land managers including State Forests, National Forests, National Wildlife Refuges, State wildlife/game management and State wildlife law enforcement; 2) landowners including industrial and nonindustrial forest landowners, and agricultural and livestock interests; 3) hunters including deer hunters, bow hunters, the National Wild Turkey Federation, and trapping interests; and 4) national/southeastern environmental organizations. In addition to the stakeholder representatives and Service staff, members of the recovery team associated with the stakeholder groups also would be invited to attend. Funding to hold these meetings has been requested in the Service's Jacksonville Field Office's 2003 budget request.

Communications Strategy Proposal:

The Jacksonville Field Office has included a proposal for funding to hire a public relations firm to develop a communications strategy for the recovery plan in our 2003 budget request. The goal of the project is to develop a cost-effective strategy that can be translated into recovery plan tasks that when implemented will provide a maximum level of support for panther recovery and a public/political atmosphere that will foster the best chance of success for a reintroduction program. Objectives are to: (1) evaluate other reintroduction efforts to determine "lessons learned" relative to communication; (2) identify sociopolitical data needs including appropriate public opinion and attitude surveys; (3) identify specific audiences for targeted outreach/education efforts, and 4) develop messages and effective methods to deliver them that will increase support from key constituencies and assure potential adversaries that the Service sincerely wants to cooperatively develop a reintroduction program that, to the greatest extent possible, addresses their needs and concerns, but that also meets our statutory obligation to recover the species under the Endangered Species Act. If funding is received, this project may be combined with the stakeholder focus group meetings.

Panther Scientific Review Team:

In June 2002, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and the Service assembled an independent scientific review team to critically evaluate the existing panther data and literature. The team consists of Howard Quigley (Hornocker Wildlife Institute), Paul Beier (Northern Arizona University), Mike Vaughan (USGS, BRD-Virginia Tech) and Mike Conroy (USGS BRD-University of Georgia). To date, the team has classified the published and unpublished literature into four topical areas (demography; habitat and prey; genetics; and disease, health and contaminants) and assigned two reviewers to each area. Each paper has been read by at least two of the team members. For each of

the topic areas, each pair of reviewers has provided a list of key papers for the other members to review. A meeting will be held in early November to discuss the strengths, weaknesses, limitations, and need for additional clarification or research. A final report will be available by June 2003.

Habitat Evaluation of Potential Reintroduction Areas:

Frank van Manen, and Cindy Thatcher (USGS, BRD, University of Tennessee) gave an update on the work they had completed to identify and rank potential restoration areas in the southeast (power point presentation attached). A draft map of the southeast showing preliminary results was distributed to the subteam. A final report is due June 2003.

Recovery Actions related to reintroduction:

The subteam reviewed the results of the threat assessment conducted at the last recovery team meeting. No changes were suggested. Using the results of the assessment (stresses, sources, and their rankings), the subteam outlined the following actions and considerations applicable to restoration of panthers in unoccupied areas outside of south-central Florida that should be included in the revised recovery plan. Some sources with low overall threat ranks were not discussed because of time limitations.

Factor A: The present or threatened destruction, modification, or curtailment of the Florida panther's habitat or range.

Urbanization:

- ▶ Use human population growth and change detection analyses in the evaluation of potential restoration areas.

Transportation Projects:

- ▶ Coordinate with State departments of transportation and Federal Highways to plan for road/panther issues.
- ▶ Discourage new roads in roadless areas.

Inadequate evaluation of potential habitat in historical range:

- ▶ Ground truth identified potential restoration sites.

- ▶ Enlist the participation of the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies as a forum to facilitate State wildlife agency buy in on restoration site map.

Conversion of habitat to agriculture:

- ▶ Use Wetland Reserve Program, Conservation Reserve Program, and other incentive programs to secure panther habitat.

Human recreational uses in panther habitat:

- ▶ Integrate panther needs into planning documents and permit reviews.
- ▶ Coordinate with land managers regarding the effects of uses on panthers.
- ▶ Identify potential impacts to panther habitat from various types and intensities of use.
- ▶ Develop a panther land management handbook.

Invasive exotics plant species:

- ▶ Probably do not need actions specific to panthers.

Lack of incentives to maintain and/or restore panther habitat:

- ▶ Use available programs to protect, conserve and restore panther habitat in restoration areas including the Land and Water Conservation Fund, conservation easements and incentive programs (e.g., CRP, WRP, Partners for Fish and Wildlife).
- ▶ Consider panthers in the review of State plans related to the State Wildlife Grant program.

Lack of complete data in historical range:

- ▶ Identify State public lands and conservation easements in potential restoration areas. Sources may include the Service Ecological Service Field Offices, Natural Heritage databases, NRCS, National Wetlands Reserve, GAP programs, and the Southeast Ecological Framework.

- ▶ Determine prey densities in potential restoration areas.

Conversion of habitat to silviculture:

- ▶ Work with the timber industry to retain land holdings in timber production and to foster compatible prey management.

Conflicting mandates and management for other species:

- ▶ Pull together the various agency plans within the selected restoration area to identify concerns or issues and possible solutions.

Lack of implementation of management plans:

- ▶ Secure funding for implementation of management plans important to panthers.

Factor B: Overutilization for commercial, recreational, scientific, or educational purposes.

Impacts of capture and monitoring:

- ▶ Ensure trained staff and appropriate protocols are used. A veterinarian should be present at captures.

Factor C: Disease and predation.

All diseases:

- ▶ Evaluate potential disease problems in restoration areas.
- ▶ Vaccinate all panthers prior to their release for relevant diseases.

Factor D: The inadequacy of existing regulatory mechanisms.

Inadequate land use planning and impacts evaluation:

- ▶ The Service and other agencies should review and comment on local land use plans and provide input and expertise on panther issues/biology in restoration areas.
- ▶ The Service should develop section 7 consultation requirements in restoration areas including cumulative impacts evaluation. Experimental nonessential designation should be considered.
- ▶ The Service should consider the panther in reviewing projects and permits in restoration areas in order to help maintain these areas.
- ▶ Should restoration be successful, then develop State management plans and regulations that would allow delisting.
- ▶ Ensure that panther needs are integrated into public land management planning in restoration areas.
- ▶ Identify panther data needs and develop and distribute this data and information to regulatory agencies to enable appropriate planning, consultation, and permitting.

Little to no protection of upland habitats and inadequate land conservation or acquisition programs:

- ▶ Identify priority habitats in restoration areas in a similar process used by the MERIT panther subteam in South Florida.

Conflicting laws, regulations, mandates, or policies:

- ▶ Identify and resolve State laws, regulations, or policies that could conflict with restoration.
- ▶ Identify where grazing leases occur on public lands in restoration areas.
- ▶ Determine if predator control policies are in conflict with restoration.
- ▶ Identify and resolve conflicts among Federal and State listing status for panthers.

Factor E: Other natural or man made factors affecting the Florida panther's continued existence.

Public perception, misconception and lack of knowledge:

- ▶ Prepare and distribute outreach information to news media and the public.
- ▶ Formulate communication needs by 1) evaluating public attitudes in the top ranked restoration areas (attitudes are the most important at the local scale) and 2) identifying key supporters and opponents.
- ▶ Develop a protocol and mechanism to be responsive to credible sightings of mountain lions in the Southeast as a means to show concern to the public and to change attitudes.
- ▶ Start outreach efforts on a regional scale and get to the local level latter.
- ▶ Bring law enforcement personnel and agency staff in early in the process. Provide direction and consistent messages for them to present to the public.
- ▶ Develop and present a unified message among all agencies involved in panther restoration.
- ▶ Identify economic values of having panthers.
- ▶ Develop a teachers/classroom curriculum (e.g., Black Bears and Songbirds of the Lower Mississippi Rive Valley cd rom).
- ▶ Understand what was done in the experimental releases of Texas cougars in North Florida and use the results of that study.

Conflicts with livestock:

- ▶ Develop a protocol and acquire necessary resources to address potential nuisance panthers. Ensure a timely and in person response. Local agencies may be the most appropriate and effective.
- ▶ Minimize use of captive breed panthers.
- ▶ Develop protocols that identify under what conditions panthers will be removed or translocated.
- ▶ Develop and fund a compensation program for depredations. Minimize requirements for compensation and define when to pay. Clearly state the end point of the program. The

program should stress avoidance of problems first. Consider allowing NGOs, APHIS, and local community representatives to decide who receives compensation. Ensure that these individuals are adequately trained.

- ▶ Develop a landowner panther handbook. The handbook should include recommendations designed to minimize nuisance problems. Develop a means to fund any changes that may be needed on applicable properties.

Public fear of panthers:

- ▶ Develop and implement a “living with panthers” outreach program. The program should proactively address potential and perceived risks.
- ▶ Develop a response plan in the unlikely event of a panther caused human injury or fatality.
- ▶ Provide real-time monitoring of released panthers.
- ▶ Determine human perception of predators using existing data from other areas.

Distrust of government agencies:

- ▶ Enable public input into reintroduction issues. Consider using public meetings.
- ▶ Consider developing a citizen advisory/oversight committee (e.g., grizzly bear). The committee should help define what they do, the decisions they can make, and the areas of concern.
- ▶ Develop a stakeholder, site specific organization whose goal is to restore the panther (e.g., a Panther Conservation Committee patterned after the Louisiana Black Bear Conservation Committee) as sites are chosen and restoration proceeds. The organization would serve as a means for communication and coordination, and a forum to resolve problems.
- ▶ Develop a panther restoration implementation team.
- ▶ Ensure stakeholder participation in restoration site selection.
- ▶ Use available Endangered Species Act tools to remove burdens on landowners. These include using an experimental nonessential designation, safe harbor agreements and habitat conservation plans as appropriate. Provide outreach to landowners regarding these.

- ▶ Identify and use non governmental organizations and local people in the restoration program.

Agency funding and resource constraints:

- ▶ Identify agency partners, the resources they can provide and especially the resources they will need to participate (a resource list).
- ▶ Identify ways to increase funding for related programs (e.g., deer/prey management).

Lack of incentives for States:

- ▶ Generate public support for restoration.
- ▶ Identify and use ecotourism values and economic incentives related to panthers. Determine if a huntable panther population is a realistic goal. Craft an ecotourism program for panthers (cameras, monitoring and visitor center).
- ▶ Explore the relationship of panthers to prey numbers/distribution as they relate to agriculture (e.g., could panthers reduce deer damage) and auto accidents (could panthers reduce deer/auto collisions). If measurable, use this information as a benefit in support of restoration. Probably should not use this a selling point for the program but as a counter argument defending the program.

Agency's fear of liability:

- ▶ Determine the legal liability issues for State participation in a restoration program. Identify the existing State laws and immunities and obtain a solicitor's opinion regarding liability.

Public official's fear of losing constituents:

- ▶ Inform and educate elected officials early.
- ▶ Identify local supporters and enlist their help to develop political support.

Influence of opposing special interest groups on public officials:

- ▶ Develop a response plan to counter a vocal minority that may oppose panther restoration.
- ▶ Identify key politicians and community leaders and provide information regarding panthers, the recovery program, and results of public attitude surveys well in advance of reintroduction.

Conflicts with hunters and hunting:

- ▶ Ensure that hunting regulations are not changed because of panther restoration.
- ▶ Inform and educate hunters regarding the effects of panthers on prey base (how many deer/hogs will panthers take and what will be the impact to hunting success?).
- ▶ Identify hunting pressure and methods in potential restoration sites.
- ▶ Address any baiting issues and conflicts.
- ▶ Identify and provide incentives to hunt clubs including agreements that could lower lease fees for clubs and/or tax breaks for timber companies.
- ▶ Partner with timber companies to address panther, hunter, and prey issues.
- ▶ Develop and implement habitat management or other active ways to counter a real or perceived decline in deer populations (e.g., food plots).
- ▶ Compare hunter success in areas with and without mountain lions in other areas.
- ▶ Provide for proactive education of hunters, especially one on one opportunities for hunt clubs.

Landowner fear of regulation, lost property rights, and negative economic consequences:

- ▶ Provide incentives to landowners for panthers. Capitalize on and use existing programs.
- ▶ Identify what reintroduction means to landowners and provide assurances to reduce concerns.
- ▶ Identify key landowners once specific restoration sites are considered.
- ▶ Define how panthers can be an asset including how the presence of panthers and panther

habitat may allow landowners to continue their current way life.

Media sensationalism and panther myths:

- ▶ Develop relationships with key media contacts and actively engage them in the restoration program.
- ▶ Provide training to agency representatives for dealing with the media.
- ▶ Develop a single set of messages that all partners and agencies consistently use.

Lack of panther information dissemination to public officials and agencies:

- ▶ Develop a panther newsletter as a means to inform and coordinate with stakeholders, elected officials, and agencies.

Road kill:

- ▶ Use other species (black bears, bobcats) to identify areas where road kills may be a potential problem.
- ▶ Look at existing habitat corridors when identifying restoration areas.
- ▶ Coordinate with State departments of transportation and Federal Highways to plan for road/panther issues.
- ▶ Discourage new roads in roadless areas.

Illegal kill:

- ▶ Provide for enforcement of existing laws. Bring law enforcement into the project early.
- ▶ Use implant transmitters to help enforcement efforts and to deter illegal killing.
- ▶ Ensure prompt response to panther related complaints and develop a protocol for handling nuisance complaints.

- ▶ Use hunting license purchase as an opportunity to educate and inform hunters.
- ▶ Provide rewards for reporting illegal kills.
- ▶ Use the media to prevent illegal kills.
- ▶ Develop a panther pamphlet, signs and other materials that include a toll free tip phone number.
- ▶ Develop and distribute signs for landowners that support panthers to post on their property.

Small number of founder panthers available:

- ▶ Develop a detailed plan specific to the chosen site to guide releases. The plan should include the number of cats, sex and age class, the source of cats (captive reared vs. wild caught) and genetic requirements. Release success may be increased by using 1) wild adult females that are with kittens or are pregnant, 2) other wild females, especially subadults, and 3) captive raised males that are used to breed females and then are removed. Consider releasing no less than 10 panthers at the same time. First release females, allow them to establish home ranges, and then release males.
- ▶ Use soft release techniques including holding pens on the release site.
- ▶ Evaluate impacts to the South Florida population prior to any removals.

Inadequate regulation or understanding of distribution and occurrence of pet pumas:

- ▶ Summarize State regulations related to pet pumas.
- ▶ Estimate the number of pets in each restoration area and determine any potential conflicts.
- ▶ Survey potential restoration areas for existing mountain lions.